

Veterans Day 2017: *“They did it for us ...”*

Nov. 11, 2017— It was one of the largest military hospitals in the world, **Walter Reed Army Medical Center** in Washington DC, and staffed by some of the smartest and most dedicated doctors on the planet. A campus with 32 buildings, most of them were filled with those wounded in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

During my time at the Pentagon serving as Chief of Chaplains for the Air National Guard from 2006 to 2010, I visited the sick and injured weekly. On one such visit while walking toward a lower campus building, I noticed a young family coming toward me. A man in a wheelchair was being pushed by a young woman with a small blonde child happily walking beside them and holding onto her dad in the wheelchair. As they approached, I saw that he had lost both legs and that pinned on the sweatshirt of the little girl was a very familiar and coveted medal: the Purple Heart—an award established under the hand and orders of George Washington in recognition of all those who have spilled their blood for this country.

As they came closer, I walked up and extended my hand to the man but first, the young soldier rendered a crisp salute. Then, with a broad and beaming smile, he firmly shook my hand and introduced his family: wife, Anna, and daughter, Emily. As I thanked him on behalf of a grateful nation for the sacrifices he, and his family, had made, he quietly shrugged it off and said,

“Chaplain, I was glad to do my duty, and still am. In fact, I joined the Army the day after September 11 and I would do it all over again.” Then motioning to his smiling, young daughter he continued, *“Because I did it for her, that she would be safe.”*

I was speechless. You know, we now live in a world that is always searching for heroes—most often in the wrong places. But you and I needn’t look far because that young man, and the many millions who have worn the uniform of this nation, remind us that just as he said with such clear courage, he *“... did it for us.”* Indeed, they are our heroes!

As we all know, there is quite a discussion going on regarding things of patriotic and national importance: taking a knee during the national anthem vs. standing and singing it. The anthem's words, under protest because of its author's personal life, are the subject of much public debate. Some say it matters little; I disagree. As one of thousands of military chaplains who has rung the doorbells of families whose loved ones would not be coming home and greeted coffins draped in the stars and stripes, the colors that do not run, I am offended by men who spend their days signing million-dollar deals and basking in a fame that they have not earned—while others stand watch and guard the freedom to do so—is both offensive and wrong. America is great and safe because of the brave men and women from every walk of life who are joined in proud and often dangerous military duty and service. Making a statement about any issue at their expense is a disgrace and is not an option.

My friends, on this weekend, at this Mass, and at all our Masses, we pause to honor our veterans. They sit in this church and dot the landscape of our entire nation and around the world. They are ordinary men and women who raised a hand and swore an oath. Most often they gave quiet and extraordinary service to our country but, if need be, sacrificed their very lives so that freedom would live. Although our words fall short to properly thank them, we honor them with our love and our prayers as we ask the Good Lord, upon whom this nation was founded, to bless them and keep them close to Him. And, as always, this day and every day we ask that He might see fit to bless America, too.

God love you.